

# Veterans Healthcare in the Community

## The CHOICE Program

Presented by the Office of Legislative Research and General Counsel

August 3, 2016

# Purpose of Presentation

- Describe the Choice Program and its goals
- Report the impact of the Choice program on access to care, including the Salt Lake region
- Discuss alternative reforms

# Key Findings

- Access continues to be a problem at many VA medical centers across the country, including the George E. Wahlen VAMC in Salt Lake City
- The Choice program, implemented to alleviate access issues and reduce wait times, has proven to be flawed
- Wait times have increased overall in Salt Lake City, especially for specialist and mental health appointments
- Several bills in Congress seek to reform the Choice program, increase accountability of management, and/or replace the VHA system entirely

# Problem: Veterans' access to timely care

- In the spring of 2014, news reports surfaced that veterans died while waiting to receive care at the Phoenix, AZ Veterans Health Administration facilities
  - It is unclear, however, whether deaths could be attributed directly to wait times, or that veterans would not have died had they been seen for their appointments sooner
- Investigations confirmed news reports, and subsequent investigations revealed similar problems at other facilities across the country
- Investigations show senior executives manipulated wait time data to obscure the problem
  - The developing scandal resulted in the resignation of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki

# Proposed Solution

- Congress passed the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to address the widening scandal of wait time manipulation by VA administrators, first discovered at the Phoenix VA Medical Center
- The Act:
  - uses \$500 million to hire more medical staff
  - increases the power of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to fire senior executives
  - authorizes the VA to build 26 new facilities
  - requires public colleges and universities to grant veterans in-state tuition rates
  - establishes the Commission on Care to provide recommendations for reform of the VA medical system
  - establishes the Veterans Choice Program, which allows eligible veterans to receive care from a non-VA provider in the community

# What is the Choice program?


- Allows veterans who are eligible for VA health benefits to access care from a provider in the community, rather than a provider at a VA health facility
- Intends to alleviate access issues in the VHA system
- Builds upon Patient-Centered Community Care (PC<sub>3</sub>) Program

# Veteran Eligibility Requirements

- A veteran must be eligible for VA health benefits, AND
- meet one of the following two criteria (generally):
  1. The veteran resides at least 40 miles from the nearest VA health center,  
OR
  2. The veteran cannot be seen at a VA health center within 30 days of when the provider indicates he or she needs to be seen

# Eligibility: Extenuating Circumstances

- The VA has established exceptions to the wait time and distance options to qualify for the Choice program
- Geographic barriers, road closures, weather-related factors, and certain medical conditions allow some veterans to qualify under the extenuating circumstances provision








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## Veterans Choice Program

### Details on the Unusual or Excessive Burden Eligibility Criteria

Veterans who are enrolled in the VA health care system **and** live less than 40 miles driving distance from the nearest facility may be eligible for the Veterans Choice Program. If they have difficulty reaching the closest VA medical facility for any of a number of reasons, listed below, they could qualify under the unusual or excessive burden eligibility determination.

Burdens	Details	Examples
 <b>Geographic Challenges</b>	A Veteran needs to travel around a large body of water, over a mountain, or needs to navigate a similar geographic barrier.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Crossing a mountain range</li><li>• Navigating across a wide lake</li></ul>
 <b>Environmental Factors</b>	A Veteran's trip to the closest VA medical facility is blocked by traffic conditions such as a road that is inaccessible to the general public, or a prolonged road closure, or by hazardous weather conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Roads blocked by military bases or other restricted areas</li><li>• Road closures due to construction</li><li>• Roads that are particularly dangerous during winter</li></ul>
 <b>Medical Condition</b>	A Veteran has a medical condition, as confirmed by the local medical facility's Primary Care Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT Team), that impacts his or her ability to travel.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vision problems</li><li>• Limited mobility</li><li>• Reduced focus or mental sharpness</li></ul>
 <b>Other Factors</b>	<p>A Veteran could be determined eligible based on the nature, simplicity, or frequency of the care he or she needs.</p> <p>This includes instances where a Veteran's VA medical provider confirms that her or she requires an attendant to accompany him or her to a medical appointment either because of a medical condition or the type of procedure needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Outpatient physical therapy</li><li>• Certain IV (parenteral infusions)</li><li>• Upper and/or lower extremity joint or soft tissue (trigger point) injections</li><li>• Optometry care such as a glaucoma screening or a diabetic retinal exam</li><li>• Hearing evaluation</li><li>• Shots Allergy</li></ul>



If you think you may be eligible for the Veterans Choice Program based on one of the reasons listed above, please contact your local VA medical facility. A staff member will work with you to determine eligibility. If you are determined eligible, staff will provide you with information about making an appointment for care through the program.

To learn more about the Veterans Choice Program visit: [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact).

# Medical Provider Requirements

- Accept Medicare reimbursement rates
- Meet all Medicare Conditions of Participation and Conditions for Coverage
- Be in compliance with all applicable federal and state regulatory requirements
- Have a full, current, and unrestricted license in the state where services are delivered
- Have the same or similar credentials as VA staff
- Submit a copy of the medical records to the contractor for medical care and services provided to veterans for inclusion in the VA electronic record

# Implementation of Choice Program

- Congress tasked the Department of Veterans Affairs with implementing the Choice program in 90 days
  - The short time frame has resulted in contractors' difficulty in reimbursing providers in a timely manner
  - Veterans, VHA staff, and providers are confused over program requirements, credentialing, care coordination, etc.
- VHA acknowledges that the Choice program has not appreciably reduced wait times for veterans to receive care

# Utilization of Choice Program in Utah

- Since the Choice program's inception:
  - Total number of appointments scheduled in Utah (as of May 2016): **5,886**
  - Total number of appointments completed in Utah (as of May 2016): **3,071**

Month	Year	Total Choice Authorizations	Total Choice Authorizations (excluding returns)	Total Choice Auths Scheduled (Initial Appt)	Total Choice Auths w/ Initial Appt Completed	Completed Appts as percentage of total veterans appts
October	2015	524	426	410	242	0.87%
November		953	628	323	202	0.83%
December		964	743	503	216	0.87%
January	2016	874	739	725	339	1.33%
February		868	778	777	238	0.88%
March		1,180	1,051	925	358	1.17%
April		988	921	902	135	0.49%
May		960	908	904	94	0.34%
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>7,311</b>	<b>6,194</b>	<b>5,469</b>	<b>1,824</b>	<b>0.85%</b>

# Choice Utilization in Utah (cont.)

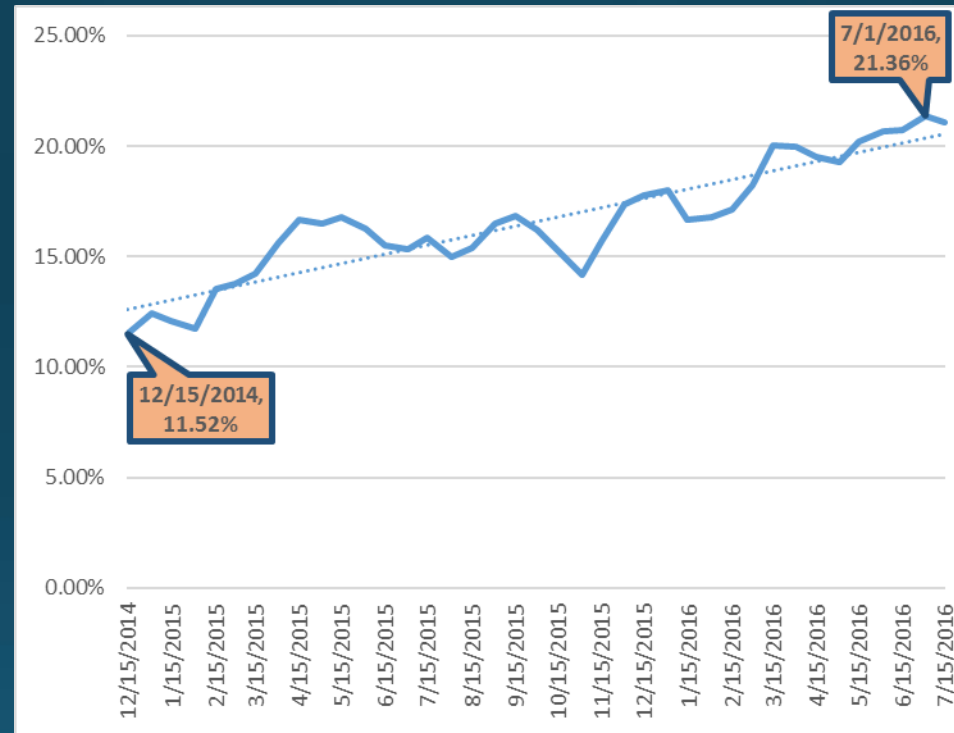
- Average Choice utilization by Utah veterans:

Choice authorizations	<b>1,512</b>
Choice authorizations, excluding returns	1,213
Choice authorizations scheduled	1,082
Choice authorizations with completed appt	495

# Wait Time Data: Salt Lake VAMC

- The VA maintains access data that measures the following:
  - Bi-monthly:
    - Appointments scheduled within 30 days and more than 30 days from preferred date
    - Appointments scheduled 0-14, 15-30, 31-60, 61-90, 91-120, and 120+ days from preferred date
    - Number of veterans on the Electronic Wait List (EWL), based on the length of time on the wait list
  - Monthly:
    - Completed appointments within the aforementioned time frames
- The preferred date is the earliest date the veteran would like to be seen
- The preferred date is also impacted by the veteran's care plan

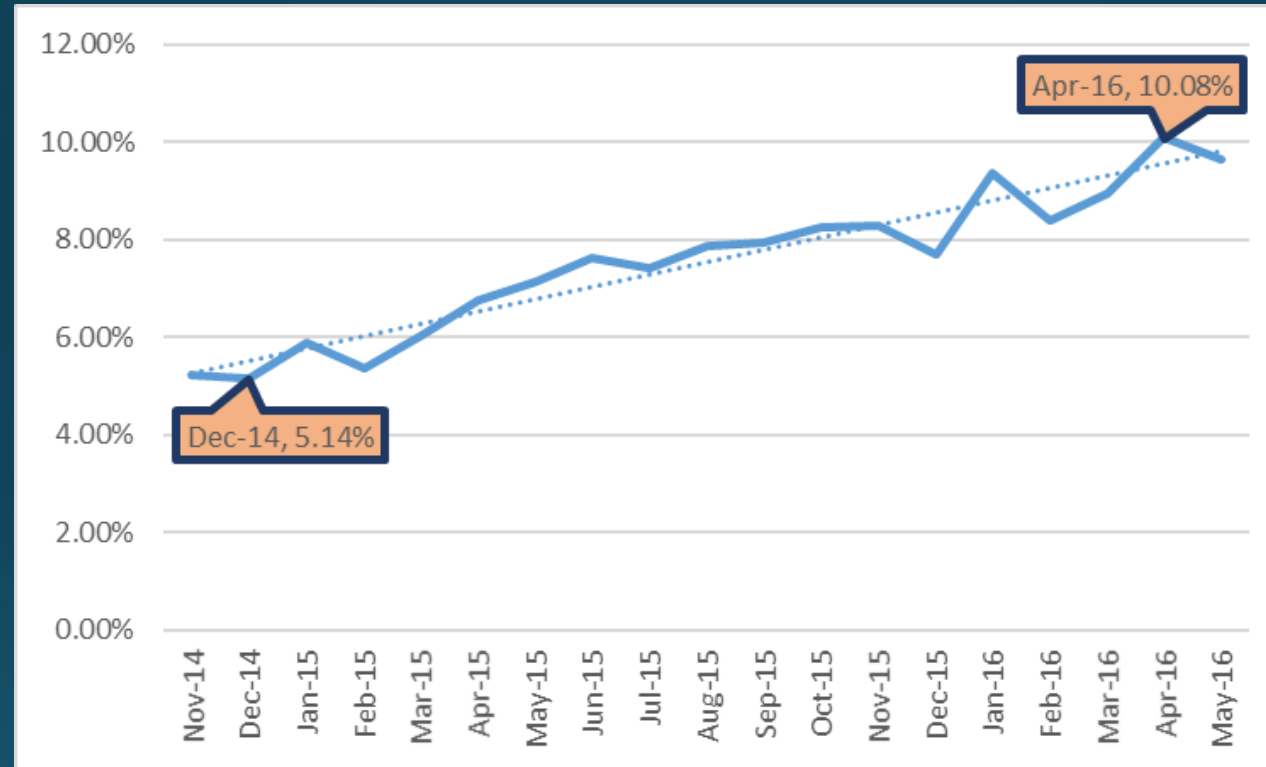
# Percentage of appointments scheduled more than 30 days from the preferred date



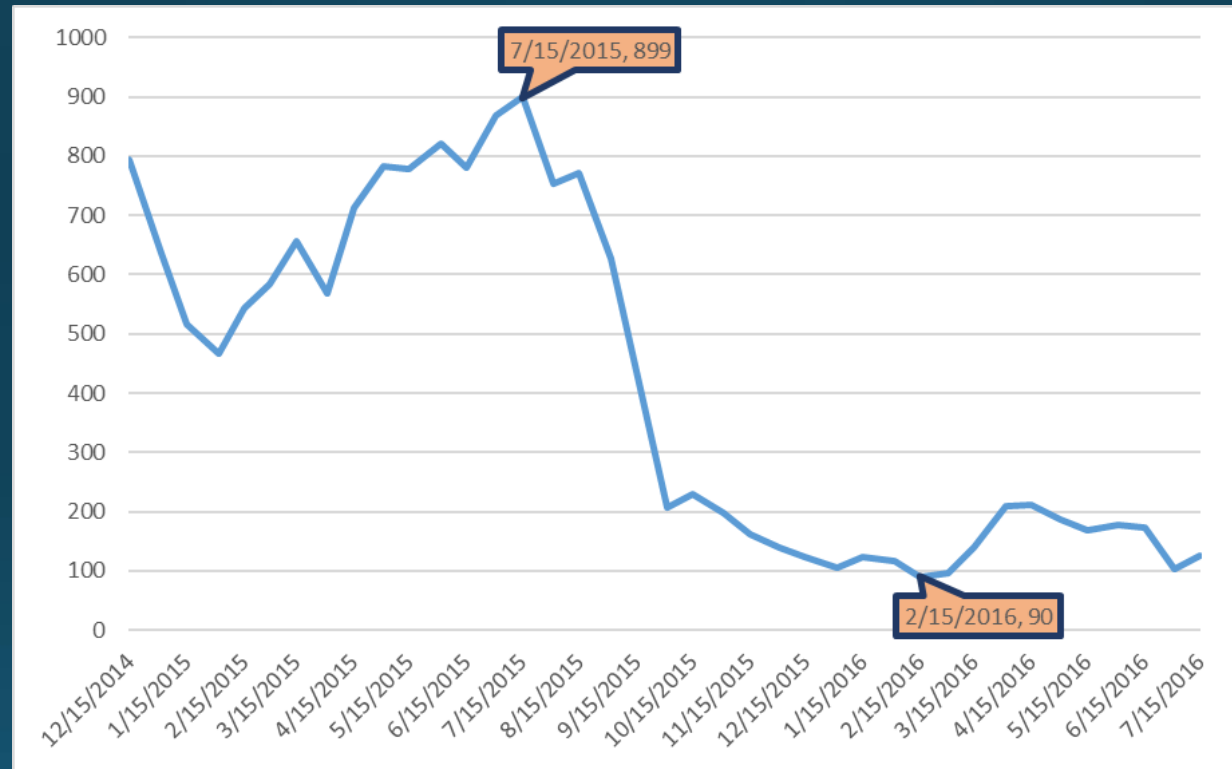
# Wait times rising

- At the Salt Lake VA Medical Center:
  - the number of appointments scheduled to occur more than 30 days from the preferred date is rising faster than the rate of total appointments scheduled
    - January 15, 2016: **3,687** appts. more than 30 days from the preferred date
      - **16.67%** of all scheduled appointments
    - July, 15, 2016: **6,246** appts. more than 30 days from the preferred date
      - **21.09%** of all scheduled appointments
  - Represents a 26.5% increase so far in 2016

# Percentage of appointments completed more than 30 days from the preferred date



# Total patients placed on EWL (patients cannot be scheduled within 90 days of preferred date)



# Wait time trends: Salt Lake VAMC

- Wait times for primary care, specialist care, and mental health care show similar upward trends
  - Specialist and mental health care show the largest percentage increase in average wait times:
    - Specialist (pending appt): **10.21** days (12/15/2014) to **16.57** days (7/15/2016)
    - Mental health (pending appt): **4.04** days (12/15/2014) to **6.74** days (7/15/2016)
  - Primary care average wait times were decreasing through 2015, but are rising again in 2016
- Upward trend holds across most time frames

# Possible reasons for wait time increase

- Veterans coming home from wars overseas resulting in increase in veterans accessing the VA health system
- Provider shortages
  - Difficulties recruiting and retaining staff
- Resource misallocation/reallocation
- Lack of knowledge or understanding of the Choice program or other care options in the community
- Delays in care authorizations in the Choice program
- Veterans in rural areas with complex medical issues have difficulty finding a provider outside the VHA system

# Veteran satisfaction with Choice

- Reports of veterans waiting longer to receive care under the CHOICE program
  - Difficulty finding specialized providers, especially in rural areas
  - Delays in obtaining authorization to see a non-VA provider
- Uneven experience
  - Veterans who are elderly or have mental health issues find the program difficult to navigate
  - Relatively healthy veterans having more success

# Provider Satisfaction with Choice

- Anecdotal evidence indicates some providers are waiting a year or more to be reimbursed for services provided
- Utah VA average provider reimbursement time ranges from 90-180 days
- Providers leaving the Choice program because of:
  - Slow reimbursement
    - VA recently implemented changes to streamline payment process
  - Program requirements
  - Administrative complexity

# Alternatives?

- Reforms range from incremental changes to dismantling VHA and replacing with insurance system
- Legislation in Congress:
  - Reform the Choice Program
  - Increase accountability among management
- Commission on Care:
  - Replace current system with “VHA Care System,” an integrated system of community health care networks that leverage VA health centers with access to private providers for all veterans in VHA system
  - Prioritize veterans with service-connected disabilities
  - Modernize supply chain, IT, infrastructure, and human capital systems

# Takeaways

- Veterans' access to timely medical care remains a significant issue nationally and locally
- The VA implemented the Choice program in an attempt to reduce wait times and improve access for veterans seeking medical care
- The Choice program has not appreciably reduced wait times, including those at the Salt Lake VAMC
- The Commission on Care recommends redesigning the VHA Health Care Delivery System (a direct care provider) with the "VHA Care System," an integrated payer and provider system

# Questions?